

Emerging Class in Papua New Guinea: The Telling of Difference, by Deborah B Gewertz and Frederick K Errington. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. ISBN cloth, 0-521-65212-X; paper, 0-521-65567-6; x + 179 pages, map, photographs, notes, references, index. Cloth, US\$54.95; paper, US\$19.95.

Papua New Guinea left behind the indignities of colonial rule only in the 1970s. Yet, as Deborah Gewertz and Frederick Errington show in this ground-breaking ethnography, some of this new nation's citizens are now inflicting similar indignities on their fellows and busily building the ideologies and institutions of a kind of inequality unknown in Papua New Guinea prior to the colonial era. To produce their fine-grained picture of "the social and cultural work of creating new forms of distinction," Gewertz and Errington drew on their ties with the "grass roots," as the poor majority of Papua New Guineans are known. They also entered what remains the "last unknown" for many anthropologists working in Papua New Guinea, the private precincts of the emerging Papua New Guinean middle class. Gewertz and Errington show members of this new elite building a self-conscious community and assuring each other that they deserve their privileges. They also show the middle class giving the grass roots "a sentimental education in self-blame" and the pain and anger of grassroots Papua New Guineans who find their efforts to cross class boundaries or

make traditional social claims on members of the middle class coldly repelled.

Gewertz and Errington are sharply critical of these developments. In fact, their book is unabashedly polemical. A strong statement on class is completely in order, and this one rests on solid ethnography. As I made my way through this book, however, two related points began to nag at me. First, the authors frequently compare the cruelties of class with indigenous social forms. They generally portray the latter sympathetically. This could easily lead a naive reader to romanticize indigenous Papua New Guinean society and take a one-dimensional view of the motives of those who wish to distance themselves from it. As the authors point out, a "strenuous egalitarianism" characterized much indigenous Papua New Guinean life. But so, too, did strenuous domination of men over women (of which the authors take note) and of old over young. Also, the indigenous systems of enduring reciprocal obligations among relative equals the authors describe were often fraught with contradictory demands and steeped in fear of sorcery or supernatural sanctions for failing to fulfill others' expectations. Of such things, Gewertz and Errington make only fleeting mention. This is consistent with their picture of the motives behind middle-class efforts to attenuate obligations to "their kin and co-culturalists," which focuses exclusively on the desire to shelter resources in order to enjoy affluence. Fully acknowledging the dark side of life

in indigenous communities, however, one can conceive of more mixed or varied motives. One can conceive of Papua New Guineans, for example, seeking affluence in order to attenuate traditional obligations as well as the reverse.

Second, Gewertz and Errington tend to treat every nonindigenous social and cultural form or impulse (such as a preference for freely chosen rather than kin-based social relations or a rationalist attitude toward traditional customs) only in terms of its contribution to class formation. It is important to show how such taken-for-granted western values as choice or rationalism can have class content. But is this so always and everywhere or is it a matter of historical context? I imagine that Gewertz and Errington are thinking of how these values function under the particular historical circumstances they found in Papua New Guinea, but they do not make this clear. If a reader assumed that they intended a blanket, nonhistorical criticism, it would reinforce a romantic view of indigenous society and an oversimplified view of the issues facing Papua New Guinea.

Only in their penultimate chapter do the authors present an explicitly more complex picture. In this chapter they analyze the case of a young woman who objected to being pressured into marriage as part of an interclan homicide compensation. The courts decided that the woman's unwilling participation in the compensation agreement would violate her constitutional rights. Gewertz and Errington argue that this decision represented the perspective of the middle class and strengthened its claim to the

right to "review and judge those leading traditional lives." Yet they take pains to point out that they do not think that "morality would have been better served" if the court had decided against the young woman. They continue, "because [the young woman's] circumstance could be easily phrased in terms of universal morality, rationality and human rights, the modern could be made readily to look morally good. If, in contrast, her circumstance were viewed from a less universalist and more evidently class-based perspective, the modern would probably look more suspect."

Here are complicated dilemmas, not just a contrast between the good old days and the bad new days. Can Papua New Guineans surmount the cruelties and injustices of indigenous society without creating new cruelties and injustices? Can they disentangle universalist values from a capitalist class context? These are daunting challenges for concerned Papua New Guineans and, for academic observers, questions without simple answers. Nonetheless, developing their analysis of such dilemmas further would have strengthened the authors' polemic. As it is, they leave readers all worked up with no place to go.

One point in Gewertz and Errington's reporting requires correction. They state that the World Bank, in connection with its structural adjustment loan to Papua New Guinea in the 1990s, pushed a program to privatize "traditionally owned land." Despite widespread belief to the contrary, the Land Mobilization Program did not aim to privatize land. Clumsy handling of the program (on the part of the Papua New Guinea Govern-

ment as well as the bank), the bank's reputation, and, perhaps, internal Papua New Guinea politics apparently fueled perceptions and accusations that it was a privatization initiative.

In sum, however, this is a valuable book of immediate relevance. It has important things to say about and to the people of Papua New Guinea and a message about the larger question of class. I hope it inspires vigorous discussion and additional research on this vital issue.

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Much has been written about inequality in Papua New Guinea. Its impact on politics has been visible as local leaders look to capitalist entrepreneurs and the educated elite to satisfy desires for greater material consumption among their more "traditional" supporters, and national leaders walk a tightrope between satisfying competing local constituencies and supporting policies that promote the economic development of the country. Its impact on social relations has been evident as young men of means contribute to higher brideprices and exchange payments resulting in bachelorhood for many men from less developed areas, greater incentives for urban migration, and participation in development schemes that promise high incomes but ultimately result in environmental destruction and the loss of subsistence; in the negative shifts in the conjugal relations of women "paid for" with exorbitant brideprices; and in the unequal relations of family members

who must work for more prosperous siblings or children who have taken charge of family lands and destinies through their success in the new economy. Now, in their excellent ethnography on class in Papua New Guinea, anthropologists Deborah Gewertz and Frederick Errington show the often denied but inevitable consequences of long-term economic and educational inequality in a free society: class and its ugly stratification of individuals as "upper," "middle," or "lower."

Gewertz and Errington's book draws on their many years of field research in different locations in Papua New Guinea. Its ethnographic focus is on Wewak, however, one of Papua New Guinea's larger towns, and the lifestyle of those middle-class civil servants, politicians, professionals, and business persons who frequent Wewak's elite clubs and organizations. The authors immersed themselves in this exclusive world in 1996. They spent a year doing participant observation as members of the Wewak golf and yacht clubs and the more exclusive Wewak Rotary Club. They attended local churches, formally interviewed 88 of the more affluent of Wewak's middle class (56 men and 32 women), and worked in other contexts such as Wewak's International School, where they volunteered as English-language reading tutors and interviewed many of the children and their parents. They also lived in a middle-class home complete with chain-link fencing and other security measures, none of which prevented them from being robbed and gaining yet another insider's perspective.

Armed with such insider knowledge of the workings of social class, Gew-